Everyone Misses This Lesson on Political Power From "Game of Thrones"

Incentives matter in politics, even in the politics of fantasy worlds.

Spoilers also matter, and this post if full of them.

In *Game of Thrones*, we see a fantastic portrayal of the ambitions, plotting, and warfare between would-be queens and would-be kings seeking political power in the land of Westeros – particularly, power as the seated ruler on land's famous Iron Throne. They fight a spectacularly bloody civil war, split up families, and plunge their lands into starvation, rebellion, and political chaos. Many people die, and many of the contenders for the throne die spectacular deaths.

Getting a seat on the Iron Throne is a pretty raw deal, and even if you have it, you might now have it for long. So why do *Game of Thrones*'s rulers spill so much blood to get there? Why not consolidate their own power elsewhere? And why does the question of who sits in leadership draw so many other people into the sinkhole of war?

The answer lies in the nature of the political power.

If the rule of *Game of Thrones* mythical land of Westeros was just ceremonial, there would be no war to think of. What if the king presided merely over a force that protected the realm but left its citizens otherwise alone? What if the kingdom lacked an army of Lannisters, or a bank full of gold, or the perceived legitimacy to raise nobles, behead critics, and control trade? The Iron Throne might be less tempting.

In reality, though (at least for our fictional characters), the throne promises nearly absolute power to anyone who takes it. What's more, it promises control over the lives of the millions of other inhabitants of Westeros. The person who sits on the throne can summon force to reshape the world around them.

Now can you understand why *Game of Thrones* is so violent?

It's not just that these would-be kings and queens – Stannis, Cersei, Euron, Balon, Robb, Daenarys, Renly, Joffrey – all consciously want absolute power. Some of them may be operating from a least-of-all-evils mentality. Some may be motivated by a desire for independence for their people. Some may believe that they will rule justly, or that they have a duty to take the throne. Some may care about their families and children.

The motivations don't matter. The results do. And the fact that all of these motivations result in all of the throne's contenders committing war crimes and acting like tyrants is

telling. By raising the stakes of the game, you raise the carnage of the game. And you raise the stakes of the game by increasing the power of the throne in the first place.

Who are the kind of people who win that game if not *exactly* the kind of people you don't want ruling you? Is it a surprise that psychopaths like Euron Greyjoy, Ramsey Bolton, and Cersei Lannister have called the shots for so long?

If you're a Westerosi and don't want to live through another War of the Five Kings or a new Lannister dynasty, you can make the case that your time is better spent fighting White Walkers. But you should also have a look at the power of your kingdom's throne. Anything that powerful is bound to generate covert and overt war again in a generation, even if Daenarys takes the throne at the end of this series. With its absolute power, the throne is too tempting of a target for the realm to be at peace for long.

This observation is not unique to fantasy worlds. Economic laws are at work everywhere, and *Game of Thrones* is only art imitating life.

If you're an American who lived through the last presidential election, I don't have to tell you much about this. You know how the power of a position can shape the bitterness of the rivalry to get it. The two candidates in 2016 represented two authoritarian factions in a culture war. Both factions knew that if either candidate gained power, the other side would be under the winning side's boot. And the size of that boot is growing – the American presidency now claims the right to go to war unilaterally, torture and detain without trial, assassinate citizens on a secret kill list, and set rules about who can trade and work with who.

The presidency, like the Iron Throne, isn't just an office. It's a weapon, and it's become the most powerful and attractive weapon available. As a result, democracy has become civil war by other means, with people who would otherwise be friends fighting bitterly for dominance.

The answer is not to wait another four years to play another Game of Offices. The answer is to look at the nature of the office itself. Centralized power and the use of that power to centrally plan society really makes people violent and hateful and awful. It turns a society from one of potential cooperation and peace to one of inevitable domination and submission.

Most of the people following this show don't get it. They want to see an enlightened person on the Iron Throne, an empowered female, a goodhearted man, a wise ruler. They don't understand yet that there are no winners in the Game of Thrones. Like the Ring of Tolkien's myth, this Iron Throne must be destroyed.

In some of my favorite words from the series so far:

"Lannister, Baratheon, Stark, Tyrell, they're all just spokes on a wheel. This one's on top and that one's on top and on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground. We're not going to stop the wheel. I'm going to break the wheel."

*– **Daenarys Targaryen***